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SPEECH

OF

WILLIAM MAXWELL, Esq.

OF NORFOLK, VIRGINIA,

BEFORE THE

American Bible Society,

AT THE

TENTH ANNIVERSARY MEETING,

Held in the Middle Dutch Church, in Nassau street,
in the City of New York,

ON THURSDAY, MAY 11, 1826,

On moving the following Resolution:

Resolved, That the experience of ten years adds strength to the conviction, which the members of this Society entertained at its formation, of the great importance of the institution, the wisdom of the principles on which it was founded, and the necessity of still greater exertions among the friends of the Bible, in every part of the country, for the promotion of its views, and the accomplishment of its objects.

PHILADELPHIA:
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1826

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SPEECH.

Mr. President:

I rise to move the resolution which I hold in my hand, and which I must beg leave to introduce with a few remarks. Not, sir, that I can promise you that I shall be able to say any thing, at this time of day, that will be worthy of the subject, or of the occasion. But you will allow me, sir, I am sure, (and this kind audience will indulge me) to avail myself of this opportunity, the first that I have had, and the last that I may ever enjoy, to express my sense, however feebly, of the excellence of this our great national, and Christian cause.

Yes, Mr. President, it is a good cause in which we are engaged. For what is it, sir, that we have undertaken to do? Why, sir, we are united and confederated to send and circulate this book of ours, which we commonly call the Bible, or the Book, by way of eminence, as it deserves, as far and widely as possi-

ble, throughout our land, and throughout our world. And what can I say, sir, what can man or angel say in praise of such an engagement, beyond its own merit? Infidelity indeed may smile, may affect to smile, while she trembles, to see so many wise and reverend men as I have before me, with many others in all parts of our country, who though absent are present with us in spirit, pillars of the church, and guardians of the state, all combining their efforts with so much zeal, to circulate a book, this plain and homely book, which she would have exploded long ago—and she may say with a sneer, that here is a mighty toil for a little end. But no, sir, our labour is not extravagant, and does not and cannot transcend the value of the object that we have before us, and the blessings that it involves—*Our labour is not in vain in the Lord.* For what is this book of ours that we are diffusing? It is, you will believe me, sir, no common book. No, sir, it is not one of those passing productions that are daily falling from the teeming press, to live their little life, enjoy their fleeting fame, and then vanish away into oblivion. Nor is it merely the fine and fascinating production of some gifted writer, born to enchant the world, who "catches the manners living as they rise," and transfers them warm with life to his own glowing pages, and thence transfuses them again into the hearts of his readers, by the witchery of his pen. Nor is it even some mighty model of intellect

or genius, some Novum Organum, some Principia, or some Paradise Lost, which its immortal author has given or bequeathed to the world as a possession, or a legacy for ever. Though such a work we might regard as indeed "the life of a master-spirit, treasured up to a life after death," which we would "not willingly let die," and which we might gladly help to send abroad. But, sir, we would not unite, we would not form a society, to circulate even such a work, nor any mere work of man. But, sir, this book of ours is no work of man. It was not made by man—for *all scripture is given by inspiration of God. And no part of it is of any private suggestion; but holy men of old-time wrote as they were moved by the Holy Ghost*—they were the amanuenses of the Spirit. Yes, sir, this book of ours, the Bible, is the word of God; and as far above all human productions as his nature is above ours. It is a book every way worthy of its AUTHOR, and which proves itself and HIM. But, sir, I will not fatigue you with a long panegyric of this book. I have not come here to this house to-day armed at all points with the quotations which I could easily have got together, and from the most eminent authors, in praise of this wonderful volume. And, indeed, I must say that it has sometimes appeared to me as a little presumptuous, as undoubtedly it is in one point of view, even in such men, to offer themselves as vouchers for the excellency of the book of God.

For does he stand in need of epistles of commendation from them, from his own creatures, and in his own world, to give his work credit, as it were, with the booksellers, and popularity with the public? No, sir, we do not want them to tell us, we could all have told before-hand, that if ever God should condescend to write and publish a book, after the manner of men, it would easily eclipse all the writings of their pens. Sir, *he that made the eye must see*, and he that made the intellect must know how to address and affect it by all the force, and power, and charm of words. And, accordingly, the book of God, we find, has an empire over the mind, and heart, and soul of man, which is peculiar to itself; and which alone, without all other argument, demonstrates it to be divine. For what other book has ever appeared among us, so sublime and so familiar, so strange, and yet so true, accommodating the highest philosophy to the lowest intellect, and infusing, and inspiring as it were by a charm, the most mysterious and celestial truths, and truths defying all the efforts of a merely carnal mind to comprehend them, into the humblest and meanest capacities. Sir, it is the book of God! And it is the book for man. It is the book of all ages, and ranks, and classes, and conditions of men. It is a book which the old and the young, and the rich and the poor, and the wise and the simple, all the sons and daughters of Adam, without exception, can, and ought to sit down and

read together. It has something for them all, and for every one of them—for all of them together, and for every one of them by himself. It has philosophy, above all that of the Academy, or the Lycæum; eloquence, beyond the torrent of Demosthenes, or the conflagration of Tully; poesy above the swan of Homer, or the angel of Milton; and history, and biography, and allegory, and all the lovely varieties of composition, delightfully and divinely blended together by the very mastery of God. It is the tablet of the soul, the chart of heaven. It is the mine of wisdom,—a mine of *hid treasure*, of the richest and rarest ore, a glorious vein indeed, running through the earth, yet not of it; profuse of precious stones and orient gems, all like those spiritual ones that shone so brightly, and so consciously, on that divinely decorated breast. Or it is, if you please, a galaxy, or rather a whole Heaven of stars, more bright, and beautiful, and glorious, as the sacred Psalmist assures us, than the firmament itself. That Sir, magnificent as it is, is but the outer court. The Bible shews us the interior of the sanctuary—the Ark of the Covenant, with the Mercy-Seat, and the Cherubim overshadowing it with their wings, and all that mystery of mysteries into which *the angels desire to look*. But I will not pursue the theme, which would foil a seraph's tongue to do it justice. I will not attempt to "magnify the sidereal hemisphere with a concave mirror," and that a broken

one indeed. The Bible alone, like that light to which it has been compared, and which is, indeed, its best type, though even that is but a shadow of its glory, the Bible alone can speak its own praise.

> "The Bible's worth the Bible must disclose,
> For what light is 'tis only light that shews.

Yes, sir, let us only read this volume for ourselves, let us bring, or rather have it brought home to our bosoms, by the grace of God, till we feel its virtue, its spirit breathing, and living, like one new-born, in our hearts, and we shall have a proof, an impression, an experience of its excellence, that will make all other eulogium, however eloquent, absolutely poor and frigid in the comparison.

And now, Mr. President, if all this is true, (and really, Sir, the half has not been told you) I appeal to you, if it is possible for us to circulate our book, as we are doing, without producing the most sensible, and happy effects. Sir, it appears to me, that, for one thing, we must naturally, and almost necessarily, make men more intelligent about us. For, however you may account for it, it is certain that no book that we know of has half so strong and stirring an influence upon the human intellect, as this same Bible of ours. It comes, indeed, directly home to "the business and bosom" of every man, and raises all his mental powers and faculties at once, as by a spell. It awakes his mind out of the sleep of apathy. It rouses his consciousness as it lay dreaming, and

tranced, as it were, in the silent cell of his breast. And so it makes the mere "man-monster," little more than one before, "suspect himself to be a man." And the reason, I think, is plain. The Bible does not address itself to him as a mere man's book of instruction or amusement, which he may read or not as he pleases; but it comes to him as a book of Fate. It arrests him there in the name of God. It arraigns him on the most capital charges, and calls upon him for his "how say you," as in open court. It alarms, it agitates, it affects him, it shakes him through his whole frame, and soul, and being. Sir, *it is quick and powerful;* and it is no wonder that it makes men intelligent. But it also makes them moral. It affects the understanding, indeed, as I have said, chiefly through the medium of its home appeals to the conscience, and the heart. And then it gives the most lively and lovely lessons of virtue, and always with an air of authority, and not as do the books of the scribes. And it teaches them in the most pleasing and popular forms, not, indeed, in "cunningly devised fables;" but in familiar facts, and pathetic parables, and touching incidents, in all the purest and sweetest modes, and all accompanied, as we believe, with the most holy and happy influences of the Spirit of God that breathe about among its leaves, like the vernal airs of Paradise, to inspire them into the soul.

And here, sir, it is impossible for us not to see and feel at once, how directly and essentially our

engagement tends to strengthen and establish the foundations of our national freedom and happiness. Sir, it has been well said by a great politician of another country, by Edmund Burke, that "religion is the basis of civil society"—and especially, he might have added, of a free state. And it has been said by a greater than he, by our own Washington, that "of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports." And without pursuing the idea through all its illustrations, (for which I have not time) what, I would ask, without their genial influences, what is to moderate and chasten that pride of self-government, that lust of power, which is generated, and inflamed by all our institutions? What is to prevent our liberty, great as it is, from lapsing into licentiousness? Sir, we hold, you know, (and rightly too,) that all government is, or ought to be, made and managed for the benefit of the people. And we say that "we the people" are the sovereigns of the country, the fountain of law and honour; and we appoint our rulers for servants, to follow our instructions, and obey our will in all things. And we maintain, (or many do) that we the people can do no wrong, and that our voice is the voice of God. Here, sir, you see, is absolute power; and it is the nature of absolute power, we know, to corrupt and inflate its holders, and that whether they be many or few. And what now,

I ask you, sir, is to save us from the abuse of all this power? What is to prevent our free democracy—especially when our country becomes crowded with people, as it will be by and by, even through our woods and prairies, and our cities are choked with men, almost stifling each other with their hot breath—what is to prevent our free democracy from following its natural bent, and launching us all, or those who come after us, into a wild and lawless anarchy? I know, sir, that we plume ourselves, and with some reason too, upon that principle of our government, almost unknown to the ancients, which we are pleased to call our invention, our discovery, though we might more truly and modestly term it our felicity, growing out of our situation and circumstances, by the good providence of God, our elective franchise; and this, we think, is to save us from their fates. But what, sir, I would ask our politicians, is to save our elective franchise itself? What is to make it worth having? What is to make us choose wise and honest men to make our laws? What is to execute them after they are made? What is to save us the people from the ambition and treachery of our own elected servants? What is to keep our servants from becoming our masters? And what is to save us from ourselves—from our own passions and vices, the only formidable enemies of republics; the only ones at least that we, sir, can or ought to dread? Sir, our general intelligence and virtue—

the general intelligence and virtue of all classes of our people—with the blessing of God Almighty upon us—and nothing else. But this intelligence and virtue are to be shed abroad, in a great measure, by the Bible, and the Bible alone. It is quite clear at least, I think, that they can never be diffused to any proper or sufficient extent through the mass of the people, without a free and generous circulation of this book. And all experience, I think, ancient and modern, confirms my sentiment. Sir, you remember Athens—she was the eye of Greece—the eye of all the earth—and you remember how she rose, and flourished in arts and arms, and diffused herself abroad, till she became the light and beauty of the world. But now, alas! how changed!—she sits among her fallen columns, and her broken shrines—accusing Fate. And why? Her oracle is dumb; but I will answer for her—it is because she had no Bible. True, she was religious enough, and overmuch, in her own way and style. For she had always, you know, sir, a large stock of gods and goddesses, (such as they were) on hand, to suit the taste of every body. And she manufactured them at home, and imported them from abroad. And she commanded her philosophers to extol them, and condemned the books of her atheist scribbler to the flames. And she built temples for them, and raised statues to them, as fine, and fair, and fashionable, (almost excusing her idolatry,) as the Genius

of Sculpture could make them. And she had an altar for every one of them that she knew, or had ever heard of, or dreamed about; and one more—and it was inscribed "TO THE UNKNOWN GOD." But there it was, sir—with all her wisdom she knew not God—for she had no Bible, bringing life and immortality to light, to reveal him to her. In vain, therefore, did she guard that statue of Minerva in her temple. She had no Bible to diffuse the knowledge of GOD, and intelligence and virtue along with it, among her people—she had no Bible—and she fell. And what now, I ask you, sir, is to save our city, our republic, from the same fate? That Bible which she wanted; but which, I thank God, we have. Yes, sir, the Bible, the Bible is our true palladium, sent down to us from Heaven, to preserve our freedom; and we will guard it with a holy care—for we know that whilst we keep it, our city cannot be taken, our country will be safe. Yes, Mr. President, and I cannot help imagining at this moment, remembering whose words I have been extending, with what joy that great and good man, whom we fondly and truly call The Father of our country, would have hailed the day of this society. O! if he could have seen its light rising upon our land, with what zeal would he have come forward from the shade of his retirement, to enrol himself among its members and friends. With what patriotic pride, with what Christian ardour, he would have embraced our cause—

and, like the good old prophet in the temple, when he held up the young Desire of Nations in his arms, he would have exclaimed, "Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared before the face of all people, a light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel!" Alas! sir, he "died without the sight." But, sir, from heaven where he lives, on this auspicious anniversary of our society, with the associated spirits of our venerable Boudinot, and Clarkson, his old companion in arms, he looks down upon our institution with a smile of complacency, because he sees in all our toils new pledges for the peace, and safety, and freedom of his still beloved country.

But, Mr. President, the Bible is not only "the cheap defence" of republics, it is also the great instrument of all their happiness. It is not only the "wall of fire about," but "the glory in the midst." Sir, "A commonwealth," says Milton, "ought to be but one huge Christian personage, one mighty growth and stature of an honest man, as big and compact in virtue as in body; for look," says he, "what the grounds and causes are of single happiness to one man, the same ye shall find them to a whole state." The Bible then, sir, the Bible which you have felt so dear and soothing to the single breast, shall be the spring and cause of all those moral movements that shall adorn the annals of our

nation, through all the periods of our future story. I am sorry that I have not time even to suggest them. But there is one of them so delightful, that I cannot let it escape me. Mr. President, there is an evil under the sun—and it is great—and it hangs, in dark and gloomy folds, over that far and fair state from which I come—an evil, sir, which you know, and we feel. I will not so much as name it among you. But the Bible shall destroy it—gradually, safely, most happily, and for ever. Yes, the Bible shall destroy it from under the heavens: for though some learned clerks have discovered that this good book of ours approves and sanctions slavery, I protest, sir, as often as I have read it, I never came across a single sentence in it that looks that way. No, sir, but the spirit of the Bible is the spirit of liberty—and it *proclaims liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound.* And it shall put away, in God's good time, the whole of that sable evil from our land—as you have seen the sun, rising in his strength, dissolve, and dissipate into thin air, that envious cloud that had gathered, I know not how, so maliciously, over his face, to hide, if it had been possible, his glory from the world.

But, Mr. President, I must not forget to say, in passing, that this book of ours, this Bible, has been ordained by God to effect still greater purposes, than any that I have mentioned, and purposes that reach beyond the limits of earth and time. Yes, sir, for

we read that he has *magnified his word above all his name.* And we know, and see, that he has chosen this book to be the very wand of his power and wisdom, to work all his mightiest, and most moving miracles withal. It is by this that he wakes the dead, and brings them back from the gates of the prison-house; and it is by this that he feeds the life which he has given, and cheers, and strengthens, and consoles his saints, and wraps them away, in the spirit, into Paradise again. And thus, sir, by sending the scriptures abroad, we feel that we are becoming fellow-workers with HIM, in the noblest business that he has in hand. We are, in fact, performing a humble, but not inglorious part, in the ministry of the gospel. And we too are ambassadors—or not exactly ambassadors perhaps; but rather, if you please, sir, a sort of *chargès des affaires* from the court above. And though we may not proclaim our message from the pulpit, we may talk of it in our parlours, or by the way. Or if our tongues happen not to be *like the pens of ready writers,* still we may shew the letter of our instructions—and give the book itself, as we do, without note or comment, and trust it to speak for itself; for GOD, we know, will speak in it, and by it, to the hearts of his own. And here, then, all may do something for the cause of God and man. Here the weak may be strong, and the dumb eloquent. And here those especially, who, though not ineloquent themselves, are yet not

suffered to speak in the church; but commanded to be in silence, may do something for that Christianity which has done so much for them. Yes, sir, and you will allow me to say, (I speak as a man,) that it is indeed no small recommendation of our cause, that it so happily enlists and engages the services of those amiable auxiliaries, whose more than magic influence is felt so benignly through all the life, and soul, and sensibility of man. But I must not pursue this topic, delightful as it is. And it belongs indeed more properly, perhaps, (though not exclusively, I hope,) to the reverend gentlemen whom I see about me, and whose honour and happiness it is to use this *sword of the Spirit* in the open field. They, no doubt, sir, could furnish you with many striking illustrations of its power, and of the wonderful effects that God hath often wrought by it in their hands. But even they, sir, could not tell you all. No, but eternity, eternity only can unfold all the mighty and magnificent results, that we shall have achieved by disseminating our Bibles through the land. Sir, we shall people the hills, and plains, and shores of heaven; and add millions, and millions of rejoicing spirits to the choirs of glory. And in that day of revelation, we shall see the fruits of our labours, and having *turned many to righteousness, shall shine as the stars for ever and ever.*

Mr. President, I must pass on; but I cannot omit saying, (very briefly,) that I do most cordially ap-

prove of the great principle of our society, which requires us to distribute the word of God *without note or comment*. Not, sir, that we would insinuate, as some have strangely imagined, that we despise all notes and comments. We do not say, and our act does not imply any such thing. It only implies, what we may surely hold without offence, if we believe the book itself, that, as it is the word of God, it may and will do great good, without any help from the wit of man. Still we do not despise that wit; but use it as we may, only when and where it behooves us. And still less do we separate, by this manœuvre of ours, the word of God from his ministry. On the contrary, it is most clear, I think, that we aid and strengthen that ministry, in many ways; and make it, in fact, a thousand times more useful and effectual than it was before. I cannot stay to shew this now; but we shall go on, sir, I hope, to send our book about as we have been doing, by itself, without any note or comment, except indeed that best and most beautiful one, that holy life which adorns, and really explains the word of God, more truly and happily than all the notes and comments in the world.

And here, sir, I cannot help saying, (though I know you have often heard it before,) because I feel it just now with new force, that it is a noble advantage, growing out of this very principle of our constitution, that it unites and harmonizes Christians

of all churches, or rather of all parts of the church, in one sacred fellowship. And the more we engage in this work, the more, I venture to say, we shall find ourselves coming, and growing together. And I must observe further, in close connexion with this topic, that these annual meetings of ours, drawing as they do Christians of all names, and from all quarters, together in one body, must produce the most benign effects. For here, sir, you see, we come to this emporium of our country, and mart of nations, and sit down with one another, in this house, and have all our rights and privileges, and joys and hopes, as men, and patriots, and Christians, as it were in common, and are indeed almost of one heart and mind again in the Lord. Sir, it is good for us to be here!—we feel that it is—and when we go away we do not part—not in spirit at least—but the few hours that we have passed together in this house become eternal. And we find ourselves exalted, and ennobled by the communion that we have enjoyed. And we are no longer solitary individuals scattered over our far-spread country; but we feel ourselves to be the members of a great confederation, whose labours, increasing every year, are combining, and shall combine all parts of our land and church, and entwine themselves with all the brightest, and most sacred glory of our country.

And now, Mr. President, (for I will detain you no longer,) with such an object before us, and such

views, feelings, and hopes about us, who can tell the value or extent of all our future toils? Sir, I am not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet; and I pretend to know no more about the matter than any plain man who reads his Bible as he ought to do, may know as well as I; but I can see plainly that our cause shall prevail, and that *the word of God shall have free course, and be glorified*, by our hands, and more and more hereafter. And I can see it now radiating from this house, as it were, and running very swiftly, like light, as indeed it is, through all the earth. And there, I see, it passes along through all our country, our cities, our villages, over mountains and plains, along our valleys, through our western wilds, and places without names, diffusing the principles of love and harmony among all the "numbers without number" of our free, and happy people. It passes through South America, (whence we have heard those grateful tidings this morning,) where nations have been born in a day, healing the wounds of war, and soothing all the elements of discord into peace. It shall cross the ocean. It shall beam, more brightly, over Britain. It shall pass through France—through Spain, melting the bars of her inquisition. It shall cross the Alps. It shall visit Greece—ancient, beautiful Greece—and set her free. And liberated, not now by the vain decree of a Roman senate, insulting her sensibility; but by the word of God, you shall see her, Mr. Pre-

sident, you shall see her come back again into the circle of nations, and sit down among us, with her own poetic garland on her brow, and our Bible in her hand. And that turban'd Turkey—sir, she shall not be—she shall not live to mock our Christianity with her vile apery, her prophet and her koran,—the Bible shall destroy her—and you shall not find her in all Europe—if any where. And Russia—poor, fallen Russia! A little light broke in upon her in her dungeon—a faint but lovely ray—but it is gone—extinguished by one—yet no, it shall return again—for though Tyranny in her folly did once forge fetters for the waves, does she dream, in her infatuation, that she can chain the light? It shall pass, in spite of her, through all her nations. It shall pass through Persia, China, all the realms of Asia. It shall gild even Africa—in her shadow of death. It shall pass through the whole earth; for *the field is the world.* Yes, Mr. President, here, at this verge of the creation, and only here, is the end of our toils. And the word of God shall be read, as well as preached, through all the world. It shall be diffused like the air that we breathe, and the light that we enjoy—and our society, sir, like that faith that formed, and that hope that cheers it, shall be destroyed only by its success;—but its charity shall live for ever.

And who now, in the view of such a consummation, will not second the resolution which I am about

to read, and who will not join me in the wish—or rather the prayer, if you please—Yes, Mr. President, I call upon you, I call upon all in this house, every one of you without exception, to join with me in this prayer—May the dawn, the day-spring, the young Aurora that broke so brightly and beautifully upon our land and world ten years ago, continue to rise, and *shine more and more unto that perfect day*, when *the glory of God shall cover the heavens, and the whole earth shall be full of his praise.*

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